

London must double gipsy sites in next decade, says Boris

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City Hall Reporter

BORIS JOHNSON is planning to double the number of sites for travellers and gipsies across London, the Standard has learned.

Nearly 800 caravan pitches will be created in the next eight years, taking the number of permanent pitches to almost 1,500.

Councils will have to decide whether to expand sites or build encampments, but a report commissioned by the Mayor said it was likely that between 37 and 55 sites would be created.

The plan, part of the Mayor's draft housing strategy, is likely to provoke furious reactions. The Mayor has consulted the boroughs, gipsies and travellers and the scheme will become part of the London Plan, which will be published later this year.

Mr Johnson argues that he has been forced to improve traveller accommodation by central Government.

Most of the accommodation is to be in Bromley, Ealing, Bexley, Hillingdon and Haringey, with only the City and Westminster avoiding having any extra pitches.

An investigation into traveller accommodation by London Councils, which represents the borough authorities, found 15 per cent of caravans were on unauthorised land and facilities were inadequate. Mr Johnson's draft housing



Expanding: there will be double the sites like this one in Keston, Kent

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strategy, states: "The 2008 London gipsy and traveller accommodation needs assessment, produced by the London boroughs with the co-operation of the GLA, demonstrates the need for 768 residential pitches over the next ten years, more than doubling the number of pitches. Much of this need arises from gipsies and travellers currently housed in unsuitable or poor quality accommodation."

The last site was built in 1996 while council-owned facilities have closed. There are an estimated 13,500 gipsy

and traveller families in London, with 84 per cent living in purpose-built homes on the sites.

The shortage of caravan pitches was discovered by council officials carrying out a survey of accommodation required by Whitehall. Their finding forces all London local authorities to increase provision, as they are legally obliged to provide adequate sites.

Senior sources at City Hall said the need to dramatically expand sites was a "political hand grenade". It would be especially damaging for a Conservative Mayor to order more sites in suburban Tory constituencies.

A source close to the Mayor said: "There's a distinct feeling we have been painted into a corner here. No one wants to be seen to be forcing boroughs to suddenly have to have lots more travellers and people were getting rather worked up about it. But it has to be in the London Plan as ordered by the Government."

Travellers groups said the pitches were badly needed. Freda Schicker, director of the London Gipsy Traveller unit, said: "We have people who have been waiting lists for years and years and can only get rented housing."

"We would prefer to see smaller new sites as they tend to raise the least objection, preferably near services and shops and on quiet roads."

If a borough refuses to comply the Government could take it to court.

PLANNED NEW SITES

Council	Now	Rise by 2012
Barking & Dagenham	11	12
Barnet	0	15
Brent	45	21
Bexley	32	57
Bromley	66	119
Camden	5	5
City of London	0	0
Croydon	2	19
Ealing	36	64
Enfield	0	2
Greenwich	46	45
Hackney	26	34
H'smith & Fulham	0	6
Haringey	10	58
Harrow	3	16
Havering	32	23
Hillingdon	20	43
Hounslow	20	15
Islington	0	3
Kensington & Chelsea	20	12
Kingston	23	16
Lambeth	15	10
Lewisham	5	19
Merton	15	16
Newham	19	19
Redbridge	16	17
Richmond	13	14
Southwark	38	17
Sutton	26	13
Tower Hamlets	36	40
Waltham Forest	20	8
Wandsworth	10	10
Westminster	0	0
London total	649	768